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U.S. Salvador Probe Called Thorough, Limited

By LAURIE BECKLUND,
Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON—A U.S. investigation into the killing of two American labor advisers in El Salvador last year has been "very thorough" but "very limited" and does not rule out the possibility that high-ranking military officers may have been involved, U.S. sources say.

U.S. officials looking into the January, 1981, shooting of Michael Hammer, Mark David Pearlman and Salvadoran land reform official Jose Rodolfo Viera stress that they have no leads tying the deaths to anyone above the mid-level National Guard officers now accused.

Nonetheless, State Department officials and spokesmen for the AFL-CIO American Institute for Free Labor Development said in interviews that they cannot eliminate the possibility of involvement by either higher officers or civilians. Hammer and Pearlman worked for the institute, which has hired a private investigator to help Salvadoran officials with the case.

"We achieved what we needed to achieve in a very limited investigation," John Heberle, a spokesman for the institute, said. "Had there been higher-ups involved, I'm sure that would have come to light. . . . Of course, there's always a possibility that something will turn up in the future. We can't preclude that."

A State Department official likened the killings to those of four U.S. churchwomen in 1980. "We have no reason to assert that there was (higher command involvement)," the official said. "That does not mean there wasn't."

Viera, Hammer and Pearlman were shot to death Jan. 3, 1981, as they were eating dinner in the restaurant of a San Salvador hotel. The labor institute's investigation suggests that the killings were plotted on the spot by Salvadorans upset over Viera's role in El Salvador's land reform program, which the



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Roberto D'Aubuisson

two Americans served as advisers.

However, there have been repeated contentions by others concerning both the cases of the churchwomen and of the labor advisers that only high-ranking military officers would order killings of such importance.

Most outspoken in the case of the hotel shootings is Leonel Gomez, a former adviser to Viera who now lives in Washington. He claims that he was personally threatened by a high-ranking military officer, whom he declined to name. Gomez said that both he and Viera survived several previous assassination attempts.

Gomez said in an interview that he is convinced that the motive for the killings was that the men were in the process of exposing corruption in previous land reform programs that was leading to top politicians.

To stop the investigation without examining the command structure of the National Guard is tantamount

to "a cover-up," he charged. Spokesmen for the labor institute angrily deny charges of a cover-up and say they think the shootings were motivated by Viera's contributions to land reform, not by a corruption probe.

Whatever the motive, a source close to the case said that one of the reasons the investigation has been "very limited" is that it focused on the events on the night of the murder and did not investigate the previous assassination attempts.

Political pitfalls—both in San Salvador and in Washington—lie in the path to resolution of the case, which fits the stereotype of a "death squad" slaying, complete with oligarchs, right-wing army officers and bodyguards who admit killing the men but swear they did so upon orders of superiors.

Names that have surfaced in the case so far include some that have long been associated with right-wing violence in El Salvador. Several are associates of Roberto D'Aubuisson, right-wing president of the Salvadoran assembly and a former army major who has long been accused by former U.S. Ambassador Robert E. White and others of masterminding death squads. He denies the charges.

Yet, U.S. agencies have gathered "scant intelligence" about the way the death squads operate, and passed up an opportunity to learn more about D'Aubuisson's associates, according to a congressional report released last month.

The report was published by the staff of the subcommittee on oversight and evaluation of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. It says that U.S. intelligence experts have "virtually ignored" what may be the most detailed documents ever captured from rightist activists.

The documents were captured May 7, 1980, during the arrest of 24 rightists, including D'Aubuisson.

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